

VZCZCXRO9006  
RR RUEHBC RUEHDA RUEHDBU RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHLH RUEHMOS RUEHPW  
DE RUEHRB #2266/01 3081126  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 041126Z NOV 05  
FM AMEMBASSY RABAT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1991  
INFO RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 RABAT 002266

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/PPD - FERNANDEZ, R, IIP, PA, DRL/IRF, NEA/MAG,  
ECA/PE/V/G/N SABED-KOTOB

E.O.12958:N/A

TAGS: [KIRF](#) [KPAO](#) [PREL](#) [OEXC](#) [SCUL](#) [MO](#)

SUBJECT: DIALOGUE, DIVERSITY AND CRITICAL THINKING AT  
MOROCCAN IFTARS

REF: A) RABAT 2100; B) STATE 166527

RABAT 00002266 001.2 OF 003

¶1. Summary: Morocco's Ramadan public affairs strategy is to adapt to the pace of Ramadan and listen to Moroccans in the context of iftar and post-iftar events. Our observations confirm Moroccan support for "institutionalized dialogue" as well for critical thinking in order to overcome stereotypes and to support moderate Islam. This first Ramadan report discusses three iftars: one with religious figures at the Ambassador's residence, one with youth at an NGO, and one with community leaders at a Rotarian meeting in Tangiers. The Ambassador's iftar for religious scholars including returnees from ECA IVL program "Promoting Religious Dialogue" prompted discussion of Moroccan Islam, religious versus cultural dialogue, and media stereotypes. PAS attendance at an iftar of the "Friends of the Coast," an Association of "Reseau Maillage" (roughly, "umbrella network" of Moroccan NGOs targeting disadvantaged youth) expressed our support for their volunteer work in the context of an iftar religious and cultural celebration. Serendipitously, we joined Reseau Maillage staff in their proclamation that post-9/11 work with youth is a statement against terrorism and received their thanks for post and MEPI English language programs targeting these youth. The Rotarian iftar demonstrated the vibrant, moderate nature of Moroccan Islam and the interest of the business community in religious education and in community development. End summary.

¶2. On Wednesday, October 12, Ambassador Thomas Riley hosted an iftar for religious scholars highlighting the return from the September IVLP "Promoting Religious Dialogue" of: Mrs. Ikram Bennani, a journalist who produces religious programs for RTM TV; Mrs. Fatima El Kabbaj Benbachir, a member of the Supreme Council of Ulema; and Dr. Mustapha Samadi, professor of Islamic Studies and producer of religious programs on Moroccan TV "2M." Other guests included: a specialist with the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO); a writer; three representatives from the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs; and a professor of Islamic law who was, 2 years ago, the first woman to give a lecture in front of the King in his Ramadan Darus al-Hassaniyya series.

Islam as a Religion of Dialogue and Tolerance

¶3. After breaking the fast, and praying in the living room (men) and a guest room (women), the guests returned to iftar to discuss the nature of Islam and how, according to Mrs. El Kabbaj, the Prophet Mohammed is a model of tolerance and modernism. Several ministry members briefed the Ambassador on the difference between the Quran and Prophetic Sayings

("Hadith") and how Hadith were collected by the Prophet's Companions and followers, passed from generation to generation, and judged as genuine or not. Both sources command Muslims to dialogue with nations of other faiths, a dialogue highly valued by Muslims.

#### The Need for Pious Wise Men and Women in Reconciliation

-----

¶4. There is an urgent need for communication, in a larger arena than that restricted to intellectuals, to enhance this dialogue. The prevailing view among discussants was that political struggles among several Muslim societies and Western societies, as well as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, have yielded not dialogue but rather barriers, misapprehensions, and stereotypes that instill bitterness and block communication. During the iftar, one of the Ministry of Islamic affairs guests expressed the need for more spirituality in the world and for more wise men and women to intervene in the resolution of political conflicts -- including conflicts as difficult as the Israeli-Palestinian one.

#### Overcoming Stereotypes via Critical Reasoning, Diversity

-----

¶5. But what kind of communication do we need? The ISESCO expert said that respect for other's piety is important, but that more important than religious dialogue (where everyone agrees to disagree) is cultural dialogue. "Westerners know us better than we know them." The guests reviewed western anthropologists from Westermarck to Geertz and his Sefrou project, which probed such topics as religious knowledge and power. The ISESCO textbook project aims to change stereotypes of Muslims in western texts and stereotypes of westerners in Islamic texts. "We must communicate to put an end to prejudices," commented one participant. Another opined, "Countries must revise history textbooks." Still another asserted, "Media must moderate rather than fan the flames of prejudice."

RABAT 00002266 002.2 OF 003

¶6. IVLP participants mentioned over iftar that they were impressed with the diversity in the U.S. and the ability of everyone to practice personal piety and conviction of dress unhassled. Mr. Samadi made a daring geographical and intellectual short-cut, putting together Mecca and the U.S. as the two places on earth where one can find a diversity of cultures and peoples. Mrs. El Kabbaj noted that U.S. schools teach such skills as leadership and communication and suggested these topics be taught in Morocco simultaneously with Islam and ethics. The ISESCO expert proclaimed that it is high time to think about creating Moroccan satellite religious educational T.V. programs that would explain Islam to the West.

#### Don't Touch My Country: Train Teens to Stem Terrorism

-----

¶7. The Reseau Maillage 14 October iftar in the suburbs of Rabat in the new "Friends of the Coast" Center brought together leaders of some twenty NGO leaders associated with this umbrella organization, along with some of the student members and volunteer teachers for a festive iftar followed by a program of music and dance. Throughout the iftar, film clips of the NGOs tutoring students, after-school programs and summer camps flashed on the television screen. Students enjoyed seeing their friends featured. After iftar, the President of Reseau Maillage provided a synopsis of how the group sprung up after the events of 9/11 as an effort to reach the disadvantaged youth of the "bidonvilles" (slums) and, after thanking the group's leaders and volunteers, also thanked the Americans for offering English language training (ACCESS Micro-Scholarships) to Moroccan youth. NOTE: This umbrella group helped identify young candidates for the ACCESS program from the bidonvilles they serve.

¶8. During his welcome to guests, the President of Reseau

Maillage pointed to a display on the wall of the Moroccan anti-terrorist poster featuring the red "Hand of Fatima" (a popular and ancient symbol to ward off harm and the "evil eye") with the words of warning to terrorists "Don't Touch My Country" - saying the poster signifies that Moroccans are standing with the West against terrorism. The PAO spoke in Arabic to thank the volunteers for their work (teachers included an American student on an internship) and to affirm America's commitment to cooperate with their network to reach out to the youth. PAS presented books and "Hi" magazine. The evening program then began in earnest with a Quranic reading by a young boy, followed by Arabic classical songs presented by young female students accompanied by a guitar and keyboard.

#### Rigorizing a Moderate Islamic Program

-----

¶9. Tangiers American Legation Museum Director and PAO attended a Tangiers Rotarian club iftar and religious instruction on October 19. Held weekly, the event draws leading businessmen, professionals, and officials from the north--including Christian and Jewish Rotarians. This one, hosted by a real estate developer in his top floor apartment overlooking the Mediterranean, included several wealthy developers, the former head of a bank, former ministers, the President of Tetouan University, and family members visiting from Europe for Ramadan. The speaker, a professor of Islamic studies from Tetouan, gave an hour presentation closely followed by all, with another 45 minutes of questions and discussion, followed by recitation by all Muslim participants of the Fatiha.

¶10. The theme of the professor's speech was the need for Muslims to rigorize their own concept of religion. He said that the West is interested in Islam and in a dialogue, but Muslims should first hone their religious thinking in order to differentiate themselves from errant trains of thought. He further asserted that Islam is a religion of free choice; in the Prophet's time there were Christians, Jews, and animists; the Prophet did not win them over by force, but by reason. There are three main levels, which must not be mixed up, from which to understand Islam: values (qiyum); judgments (ihkam); and history (tarikh). Regarding values, he observed that Islam and major religions share such values as justice, human rights, and respect for human life. When one sees anti-war demonstrations in the west, they include demonstrators from many religious backgrounds because they all share values and can unite against war. Regarding judgment, Islam is distinguished from other religions by certain qualities. Even so, Islam incorporates much of the other "religions of the book" i.e. Christianity and Judaism. Regarding history, the professor maintained that everything has a time and place, and interpretations (ijtihad) are tied to this. Decisions made in the 18th century about religious interpretation might not be

RABAT 00002266 003.2 OF 003

appropriate now. This point prompted several more questions as the men listened intently. Finally, the historical perspective provides crucial demographic and social variables.

#### Calibrate Our Religious Message to Educational Levels

-----

¶11. The professor's religious lesson outlined a view of Islam that is open to interfaith dialogue without any pretense that all monotheistic religions can be one. It was consonant with the main stream religious thought in Morocco, which aims to maintain Islam for the average Muslim and discourage radicalism. Picking up this theme, one Rotarian disparaged "youth whose brains are washed by those who would advocate violence."

¶12. Participants talked about the need to convert Morocco's

Quranic radio station (the "Mohammed VI Radio for Holy Koran" which is part of the Moroccan national radio and TV network) to provide better religious interpretation. The Jewish member noted the need for religious instruction to be adapted to the various levels of the Quranic radio station audiences, and that the uneducated needed a simpler message. There was a genuine attempt to include the Christians and Jew (this evening only one attended) in the discussion by intermittent translation of the Arabic into French, but it was clear that even the French speaking Moroccans preferred to make their comments about religion in Arabic. The university president and a businessman took turns translating.

¶13. COMMENT: Post proposed to match the rhythm of Ramadan and to listen to Moroccans. All three events accomplished this goal as they allowed us to explore inter-faith dialogue from a Moroccan perspective, rather than leading with our own programs or ideas. The participants in the Ambassador's iftar exclaimed their appreciation for being invited to pray, and expressed their commitment to dialogue. This thought on the need for dialogue was recast in a follow-up thank you letter to the Ambassador, in which one guest wrote: "There is (currently) no sustained dialogue; we need to understand each other more and to communicate even more. If today the image of America is tarnished amongst masses in the Muslim world, the blame lies first with the American Government for lack of public diplomacy on its part. At some point in the past only the Peace Corps did that successfully. What is needed with America is the institutionalization of its dialogue. Believe me, it is a must for this millennium." The evening emphasized how committed the average Moroccan Muslim is to resist the radical stream of Islam, while at the same time retaining the core of their religion. The message for us is clear: continue to reach out and continue to respect the integrity of Moroccan mainstream, moderate Islam.

RILEY